

NEWS RELEASE

U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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For Immediate Release
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U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE REOPENS PROCESS TO LIST MOUNTAIN PLOVER AS THREATENED; SPECIAL RULE PROPOSED TO HELP DETERMINE EFFECTS OF FARMING PRACTICES ON THIS DECLINING PRAIRIE BIRD

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service today reopened the public comment period on its 1999 proposal to list the mountain plover, a grassland bird found in the mountain West, as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act. With the reopening of the comment period, which was announced in today's *Federal Register*, the Service is including new information on the status of the bird received since 1999 and providing the public with another opportunity to review its proposal and provide comments.

In addition to reopening the comment period, the Service has also proposed a special rule under section 4(d) of the Act that is designed to improve understanding of the impact of some agricultural practices on mountain plover populations. In the event that the plover is listed as a threatened species, the special rule would allow ongoing agricultural activities to continue until December 31, 2004, in portions of Colorado, Wyoming, Nebraska, Kansas, and Oklahoma. This two-year period would allow researchers to complete field research and analyze data for an ongoing study that could ultimately help State and Federal agencies manage plover populations and reverse population declines.

"Determining the status of the mountain plover has been very difficult for our biologists," said Ralph Morgenweck, director of the Service's Mountain-Prairie Region. "We have very limited population trend information on this prairie species, but the data we have suggests a decline in both its breeding and wintering habitat."

"However, we need to know more about the relationship of plovers and cultivated land, and if the plover is listed, this proposed special rule would allow for the research to continue without

affecting ongoing agricultural activities," added Morgenweck.

Comments on the Service's proposal, and on the proposed special rule, should be sent to the Western Colorado Field Office (Mountain Plover), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 764 Horizon Drive, Building B, Grand Junction, Colorado 81506-3946, and postmarked by February 4, 2003.

Because of significant declines in populations of the mountain plover, the Service proposed listing it as a threatened species in 1999, but a final decision to list was not determined at that time. Reduced populations of prairie dogs and other burrowing mammals, loss of plover nests to cultivation, adoption of uniform domestic livestock grazing strategies, and conversion of grasslands and other habitats on breeding and wintering grounds are factors the Service believes may have contributed to the decline of the mountain plover.

Mechanical practices such as tilling to plant crops, prepare soil or control weeds at certain times during the nesting season are believed to affect the nesting success of the mountain plover. However, at this time, there is no scientific information comparing mountain plover nest success on non-cultivated traditionally used grasslands with nest success on cultivated fields. Therefore, the influence of tilling practices on mountain plover nesting success is unknown.

In the spring of 2001, a scientific study comparing mountain plover nest success on cultivated fields with nest success on traditionally used, non-cultivated grasslands was started by a researcher from Colorado State University. Through continuation of this study, which has now collected two years of research data, the Service hopes to identify and define the influence of agriculture on nesting mountain plovers and encourage private landowners to participate in research directed at this declining species. Data obtained in this study will help contribute to the conservation of the mountain plover on agricultural lands by identifying farming practices that can have effects on the species and developing measures to minimize or avoid any negative impacts.

The Service believes this information will assist in developing conservation actions to help the mountain plover while allowing specific agricultural activities to continue, or to continue with some modifications.

The current total population of mountain plovers is estimated to be between 8,000 and 10,000 individuals. Historically, breeding mountain plovers were widely distributed in the Great Plains region from Canada south to Texas. At this time mountain plovers occur in Colorado, Montana, Wyoming, Utah, Oklahoma, New Mexico, Kansas, Nebraska, Texas, and California. Most breeding occurs in Colorado, Montana, and Wyoming, and at least 85 percent of the population winters in the Imperial and Central Valleys of California. Research and monitoring conducted since the 1960s indicate that the mountain plover is declining on both its breeding and wintering grounds.

Historically, the mountain plover was found on grasslands that were used by large numbers of bison, elk, and pronghorn, as well as burrowing animals such as prairie dogs, kangaroo rats, and

badgers. Their grazing, wallowing, and burrowing activities created and maintained the type of habitat that mountain plovers prefer. Currently, mountain plovers show a preference for prairie dog towns and sites that are heavily grazed by domestic livestock. They also can be found on sod farms, alkali flats, cultivated fields, and other types of agricultural lands which mimic their preferred habitat. Wherever the site, a mixture of short vegetation and bare ground, and a flat topography are habitat defining characteristics of mountain plovers at both breeding and wintering locations.

The mountain plover was originally named the Rocky Mountain plover because the first specimens were taken within sight of those mountains. It has been known by several different scientific names, as well as other common names. Its scientific name currently is *Charadrius montanus*. Information on the mountain plover can be found by searching <http://mountain-prairie.fws.gov/mtnplover> and www.usgs.gov.

The Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting, and enhancing fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System which encompasses 540 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands, and other special management areas. It also operates 70 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resource offices and 78 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to State fish and wildlife agencies.

For more information about the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, visit our home page at <http://www.fws.gov>.